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In Mexico, the Pols vs. the Technocrats

Mexico's serious economic problems have brought on a crucial struggle at the highest levels of the country's political system. The outcome will have a great impact on the United States, for it could decide whether our neighbor struggles out of its desperate situation or succumbs to violent revolution.

The battle for control of the government—and ultimately for the hearts and minds of the Mexican people—is between the “technicos” (technocrats) who are now in control and the “politicos” (old-line party bosses) who yearn to regain their old power.

The struggle has drawn close scrutiny by U.S. analysts, and is summarized like this in the most recent, highly classified National Intelligence Estimate:

“In contrast to the first six presidents in the modern Mexican system, [President Miguel] de la Madrid and his two predecessors all rose to the top largely by dint of their performances as regime bureaucrats. All three appointed men of similar backgrounds to most of their Cabinet posts, and most of [de la Madrid's] current Cabinet secretaries have never held elective office.

“Opposition to this trend comes from the older generation of state and regional political bosses and from others concerned with economic mismanagement. One critic . . . lamented the declining role of the old political hands and predicted that they will have to be brought back into positions of influence to help guide the country through its current problems They fear that the new class of technocrats will be unable to maintain the support of the masses.”

In other words, the party bosses will be needed to sugarcoat the bitter pill of austerity the technocrats have prescribed for Mexico.

“The tension between technocrats and politicians is one that is heavily freighted with historical and psychological baggage,” the intelligence estimate continues, “because the former bear a striking resemblance to the ‘cientificos’—the scientific ones who came to control the country's political economy in the years before the Revolution. That violent upheaval had many causes, but high among them was the arrogance and detachment from the masses of the president and his circle of technocratic advisers.”

Even if the technocrats are peacefully ousted, it would have serious implications for the United States. The Harvard-educated de la Madrid is probably the most genuinely pro-U.S. president of Mexico in decades.

The president's popularity is slipping, though how widespread the slippage is cannot be determined. The derisive whistles that greeted him at the World Cup soccer opening—considering the high prices of the tickets—indicated only that middle- and upper-class Mexicans are unhappy over his austerity program.

As for the president, a few days after his nomination by the ruling PRI party—which has been tantamount to election for more than half a century—a journalist asked him if he was a technico or a politico.

“Politicians are the ones who win the nominations and the elections,” he replied.